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Central Intelligence Agency
Office of the Deputy Director for Intelligence

DDI Chrono

15 August 1985

NOTE TO: Ambassador Morton I. Abramowitz
Director, State/INR

Mort -

Attached is the update of the 1983 Syrian
Vulnerability Assessment. I hope it meets
the need.



Robert M. Gates
Deputy Director for Intelligence

Attachment:
NESA M 85-10168

DDI/RMGates 

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

15 August 1985

Syria Vulnerability Assessment: An Update

Summary

The findings of the Interagency Vulnerability Assessment on Syria prepared in December 1983 remain valid. A fundamental conclusion of that study was that in the near term (six to 12 months) there were no political or economic vulnerabilities the United States could exploit to produce a significant shift in Syrian policy. President Assad's liabilities remain extensive, but his undeviating adherence to longstanding Syrian positions over the past 18 months despite domestic infighting, moderate Arab disgruntlement, and--in some cases--opposition from the Soviet Union, indicate the extent of his ability to resist pressures to change course.

Assad's position probably has been strengthened in numerous respects since late 1983. His successful management of the power struggle among his advisers in the spring of 1984, his political victory over Israel in Lebanon, and the continuing effectiveness of the repressive apparatus of the Syrian state in rooting out or coopting his political opponents leaves his grip on power more secure than ever. Assad's sense of confidence in dealing with potential military threats to Syrian security probably has increased following the withdrawal of Israeli and Western forces from Lebanon. The discovery and exploitation of oil resources that have the potential to make Syria energy independent in two to three years, together with continuing assistance from mutually antagonistic aid donors unlikely to act against Syria in concert,

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reduce Syria's vulnerability to possible economic pressures. [REDACTED]

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President Assad's political liabilities remain extensive. He has devoted considerable time and effort during the past 18 months to deflecting potential threats to his power or to Syrian interests. The threat to Syrian goals posed by Palestinian resistance to Syrian dominance in Lebanon or on the Palestinian role in the Arab-Israeli conflict--together with the longer term internal threat to Syria arising from longstanding Palestinian links to Assad's Muslim Brotherhood opponents--has prompted a sharp Syrian response. Assad continues to try to fine tune the level of tension between Syria and Israel to avoid provoking an Israeli military response. He also is careful to avoid an open rift with Moscow over contentious issues in Syrian-Soviet relations. [REDACTED]

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The pressures Assad confronts limit his options and shape Syrian strategy, but they are in varying degrees insusceptible to US manipulation and could have counterproductive effects. An increase in Palestinian defiance of Syria, for example, prompts Syrian countermoves against both Arafat-loyalists and Jordan. A successful internal political challenge to Assad from any of the existing opposition groups would not necessarily serve US interests. Syrian-Israeli tension would be difficult to manage and unpredictable in its consequences. US-Soviet consultations on the Middle East heighten Syrian nervousness, but the Syrians remain the Soviet's key ally in the Middle East and Moscow will continue to be the principal source of arms for Damascus. [REDACTED]

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Political Setting

Events since December 1983 bear out the finding of the study that Assad's extensive political liabilities do not amount to vulnerabilities that can be exploited to effect a change in Syrian policies in the short term.

--The power struggle within Assad's inner circle in the spring of 1984 confirmed the existence of deep fissures within the regime, but none of the contenders sought to take advantage of the political uncertainty and attempt a move against the President. Moreover, neither the extensive attention he gave to these events nor his poor health diverted Assad from aggressive and potentially unpopular foreign policies toward Lebanon and the Palestinians.

--Assad has persisted in his open opposition to PLO Chairman Arafat to the extent of at least indirect involvement in Beirut's "war of the camps" during May and June this year in defiance of opposition from both moderate Arabs and fellow radicals like Libya.

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--Moscow's continuing failure to bring about a change in Syrian policy toward the Palestinians or on the Gulf war despite the Soviets' numerous appeals demonstrates the extent of Assad's resistance to external attempts to influence his decisions. [REDACTED]

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Assad's political position probably has improved in some respects over this period. His successful management of the crisis among his advisers probably reinforced a popular perception that his personal leadership is indispensable to the maintenance of political stability in Syria. The elevation of his brother Rif'at from the role of regime "enforcer" to the vice presidency and the reduction in size and role of the Defense Companies praetorian guard removed key targets of popular dissatisfaction with the regime. Despite continuing troubles in Lebanon, Assad can claim a major victory in having outlasted the Israeli military presence there and in having forced the abrogation of Lebanese concessions on the terms of withdrawal.

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The course of events since late 1983 also suggests that attempts to pressure Damascus by stimulating internal political opposition or by orchestrating moves against Damascus by Syria's neighbors stand little chance of success. Sunni resentment of Alawite dominance in Syria continues to fester, but the Muslim Brotherhood and the faction-ridden National Alliance of Assad's opponents have made no apparent progress toward building an organized base inside Syria or developing the resources to overturn the regime. Indeed, Assad offered conditional amnesty to Brotherhood members last January following discussions with one of the most militant factions of the organization. Jordan has mounted a propaganda campaign against Damascus and Palestinians have responded to Syrian-supported terrorist operations against Arafat loyalists with retaliatory attacks on Syrian officials and installations--all to no apparent effect on Syrian policies. [REDACTED]

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Assad's greatest vulnerability probably is his own health. He has recovered from a heart attack in late 1983 [REDACTED] and refuses to slow his pace of work. Another sudden deterioration of his health could easily occur. A successor regime might prove weaker and less skillful in regional diplomacy and more heed might be paid to mollifying internal constituencies that are responsive to moderate Arab concerns. On the other hand, a weak regime might feel the need to posture more forcefully, if less effectively, to broaden its popular appeal. [REDACTED]

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Military Vulnerability

As noted in the 1983 study, overt Israeli military pressure, or the threat of it, does influence Assad but would be difficult for the United States to manipulate and control, and serves to rally Arab support for Syria. This assessment remains valid--

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Syria is still no match for Israel in a general war. Nevertheless, Assad's sense of confidence in dealing with the threat posed by Israel or by US and Western forces probably has increased at least marginally in the past year as a result of Israeli and MNF withdrawals from Lebanon, the acquisition of new equipment by the Syrian military, and the continued expansion and reorganization of its ground forces. [REDACTED]

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In response to Israeli troop withdrawals from Lebanon, Damascus has conducted a partial withdrawal of its own forces since mid-June 1985 that has cut costs and will lead to an overall increase in military readiness in Syria. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] two armored divisions and major elements of another as well as several combat support units have been withdrawn. This has reduced the number of Syrian troops in Lebanon from nearly 60,000 to about 30,000 and will facilitate the retraining and reequipping of the ground forces.

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[REDACTED] The 3rd Armored Division--long considered Syria's premier fighting unit because of the cohesiveness of its officers and men--has not conducted brigade-level exercises since 1982 and is currently equipped with three different tank models, which complicate operations and maintenance. [REDACTED]

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Syria has received a variety of modern military equipment from the USSR, including the new SS-21 tactical surface-to-surface missile, which--given accurate target data--could effectively engage high-level targets, possibly including major naval combatants operating in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

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Syria has continued to expand and reorganize its ground forces since December 1983. In order to avoid a recurrence of the June 1982 disaster when Israeli armored columns advanced rapidly up Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and threatened to cut the Beirut-Damascus highway, Syria has formed a new armored division just north of the Syrian-Lebanese border. The bulk of the forces that comprised Rif'at al-Assad's Defense Companies have been reorganized into an armored division, which is still earmarked to protect the regime, and an airborne division. [REDACTED]

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Syrian Economic Vulnerabilities

From an economic standpoint, Syria is less vulnerable today than it was at the end of 1983. The primary factor in this change has been the discovery of a large--by Syrian standards--oilfield near Dayr az Zawr in eastern Syria. This field, which is being developed by a joint-venture company owned by Syria, Shell USA, Shell International, and Deminex, has the potential to make Syrian energy independent in two to three years. Even if the United States persuaded or enjoined Shell USA from further development work on the field, Syria--with or without its foreign partners--could continue development work. [REDACTED]

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While Syria is still dependent upon foreign financial aid from Arab donors, this aid has consistently fallen since 1983 and Syria has learned to live with less outside help. Arab financial aid will probably total \$800-900 million this year compared to \$1.2 billion in 1983. Saudi Arabia is Syria's primary donor, supplying \$587 million in Baghdad aid plus \$100-300 million a year in additional funds. Syria also receives financial aid from Kuwait and Libya, but this aid is not assured, and the Soviets have extended Syria over \$1 billion in economic credits since 1983. The United States would have a very difficult time persuading Saudi Arabia to cease its assistance and even if Saudi aid ended, Syria almost certainly would not change its policies on basic security issues. [REDACTED]

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Syria continues to receive most of its current oil imports from Iran, some free and the rest at discounted prices. The Iranian-Syrian oil relationship has become more acrimonious since 1983, with Iran often refusing to load Syrian tankers until the Syrians make payments on overdue oil bills. While this deterioration in the relationship makes Syria more vulnerable, any attempt by the United States to pressure Syria economically would likely cause a quick patchup of the alliance. [REDACTED]

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